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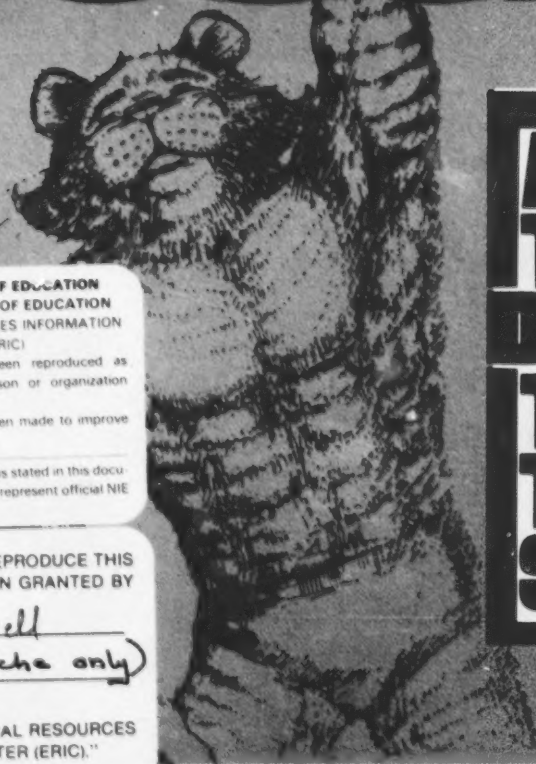
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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed for elementary and middle school teachers to use in teaching students how to improve their test-taking skills. The authors draw the analogy between an athlete preparing for the big race and a young student getting ready for an important test. The central character is an underdeveloped test-taking tiger who, after going through "test-taking calisthenics," including time management techniques, problem-solving tactics, and anxiety control, becomes a well-developed test-taking winner. The booklet contains answer sheet games, techniques for working test items, and helpful tips to improve students' test scores. This publication, although developed by the Florida Statewide Assessment Program, is not directed toward use with that testing program alone, but is for use in any testing situation. (PN)

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FLEXING YOUR TEST MUSCLES



**A GUIDE
TO
DEVELOPING
TEST-
TAKING
SKILLS**

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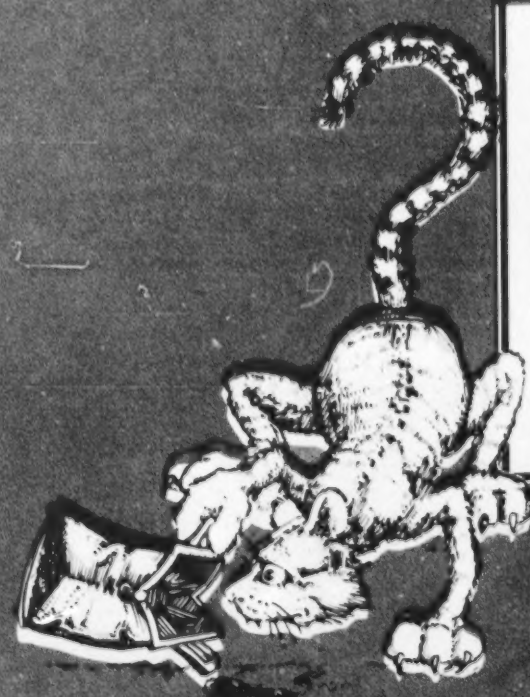
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The information presented in this publication is based on materials prepared by Dr. John R. Hills, College of Education, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

For further information on test-taking skills or additional copies of this booklet, write:

**Student Assessment Section
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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Part 1 – “Warming Up for the Competition” or Pretest Orientation	3
Part 2 – “Overcoming the Time Hurdle” or Time Management	8
Part 3 – “The Winning Edge” or Problem-Solving Tactics	11
Part 4 – “Reducing the Pregame Jitters” or Anxiety Control	14
Final Wrap Up	19



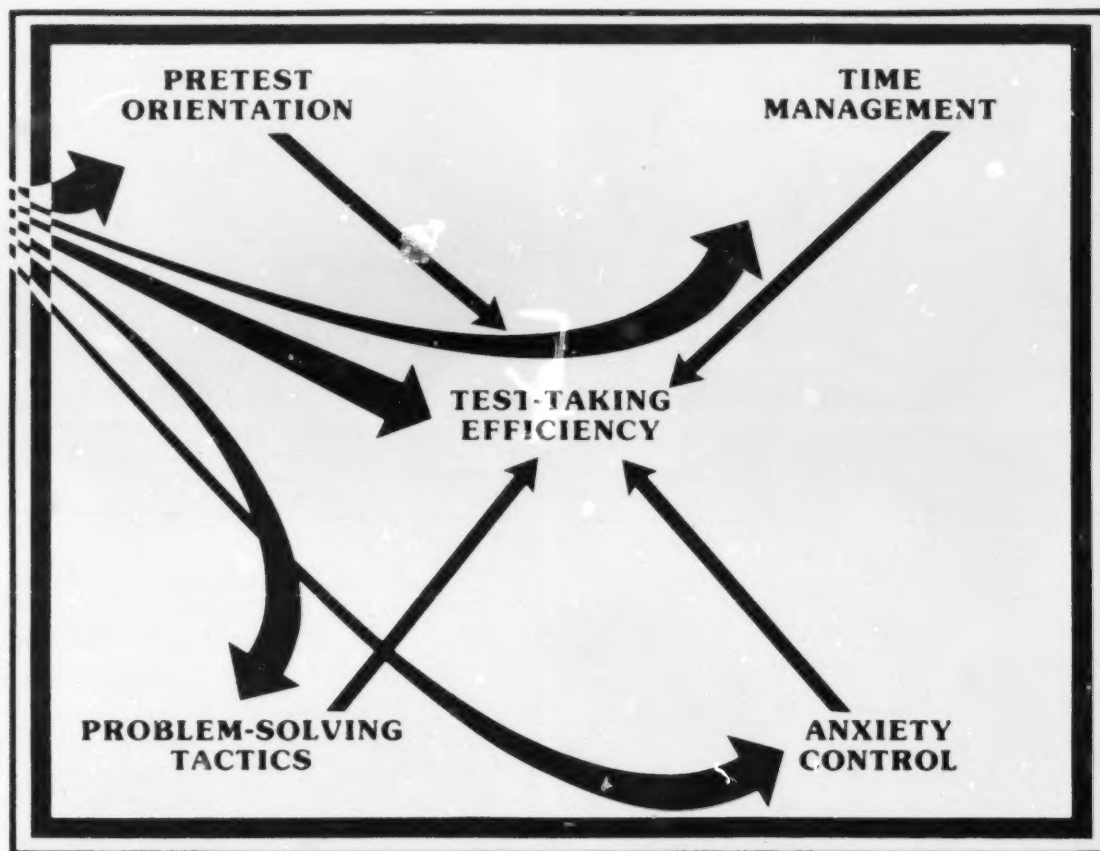
INTRODUCTION

When runners line up for a big race, they know that there will be only one winner. Therefore, runners must mentally and physically prepare if they expect to cross the finish line first. Students preparing for a big test also require mental and physical training. However, test-taking is different from athletic competition in one very major way. In testing, there can be many winners. Each student who comes to a testing situation prepared, confident, and able to deal effectively with the unique characteristics of that particular test can be a **CHAMPION**.

The purpose of this publication is to provide information for the development of sound test-taking skills. The results of a test should reflect each examinee's best performance. Therefore, it is important to do everything possible to assure that conditions for optimum test results occur. By providing a training program of basic test-taking skills for each examinee, a step is taken toward achieving maximum individual performance on tests.

This publication, although developed by the Florida Statewide Assessment Program, is not directed toward use with that testing program alone but is for use in any testing situation. In addition, much of this material may be useful in other aspects of our lives. Skills such as focused guessing, estimating, double-checking answers, and relaxing in order to relieve tension are all tools which are of value in helping individuals function more effectively throughout life.





While this booklet will not address every aspect useful in taking tests, the focus will be on four training areas for building the strong muscles of test taking skills. Each of the following four areas is considered separately in this guide.

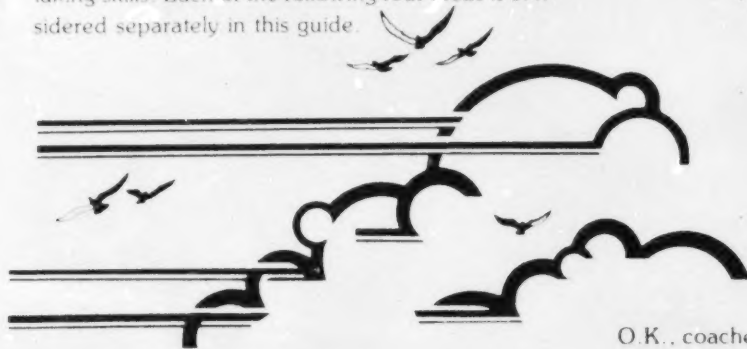
To build strong test-taking muscles it is necessary that all four areas be covered developmentally as pupils progress through their formal education

Elementary educators could apply this information as appropriate at each grade.

Secondary educators could work through this material in review sessions prior to standardized testing.

Parents interested in helping their children strengthen their test-taking skills could also use this guide.

O.K., coaches! Put on your most comfortable training clothes, get out your toughest test-taking problems, and let's start teaching all students how to flex and strengthen their test muscles.



Part 1
"Warming Up for the Competition"
or
Pretest Orientation

3

Let's imagine for a minute that a student taking a test is an athlete training for a sports event. A champion does not practice only on the day prior to the competition. It takes steady, continuous practice to produce a championship performance. In this same way it would be wise for a student taking a test to study well in advance and avoid last minute cramming. Careful review of already learned material shortly before a test is, however, a good idea.

The teacher, as the coach, has spent many hours preparing each student for the testing competition. Although the students have learned much before the big day, it is important for the coach to provide preliminary practice with the type of equipment, format, and procedures the specific testing game requires. The following activities are some testing warm-ups.

Pregame — Six steps to test readiness.

STEP 1: Using A Sample Test

Successful athletes do not enter competition with unfamiliar gear. Similarly, students need to be acquainted with the test equipment, particularly the style and format of a test. To help with this problem, some test companies offer a pretest or sample test at certain grade levels. If necessary, encourage your school to purchase and use these "get acquainted" devices. A sample test can be well worth the time it takes to administer and is relatively inexpensive.

STEP 2: Test Practice Sessions

Teachers should have students warm up for a test in plenty of time to provide proper familiarization with the format. Teachers should plan several sessions of practice and discussion, being certain to focus on

- 1) how directions will be presented,
- 2) how the test is timed, and
- 3) how answers should be recorded.

The coach's attitude can have a pronounced effect on the athletes' self-confidence. Similarly, the teacher's approach to important testing can have an impact on the student's outlook toward such testing. A teacher must balance the seriousness of

testing with encouragement and positive statements and give a pep talk about student ability. Most good coaches will tell you that few athletes win a competition without self-confidence.

STEP 3: Testing Calisthenics

Three problems often confront students taking commercial tests. These three problems are

- 1) managing a booklet with a separate answer sheet,
- 2) placing the answers correctly on the answer sheet, and
- 3) marking or gridding answers accurately.

Here are some exercises to build test-taking muscles in these three areas.



A. Test Booklets and Answer Sheets

Booklets and answer sheets are the general equipment of the big testing competition. Students who are in the early grades may be allowed to mark answers directly on the test booklets. These younger students usually require some pretest training in order to use test materials correctly. Teachers might even develop some unit tests in booklet form to help familiarize their pupils with this format. Older students who have not had much experience juggling separate test booklets and answer sheets also need practice with the physical problem of managing "all those papers" at once. It is generally most comfortable for right-handed students to fold the test booklet to the appropriate page and place it on the left side of the desk top with the answer sheet comfortably angled on the right side of the desk. Reverse booklet and answer sheet positions for left-handed students.

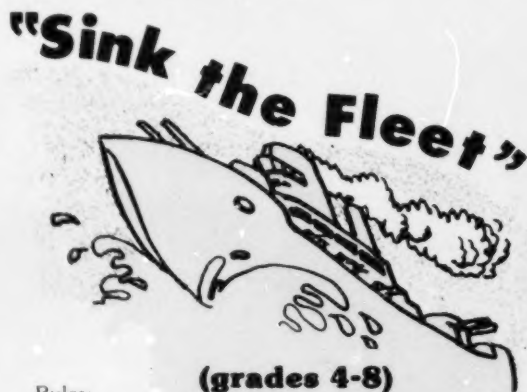
B. Placing Answers Correctly on the Answer Sheet

Paying close attention to details is the sign of a professional athlete. This attention to detail can be very crucial to the test-taker as well. If the exam permits working problems in the test booklet or on scratch paper, the examinee must be especially careful when transferring the answer to the answer sheet. Points can be lost if the test-taker correctly works the problem in the book or on a scratch paper, but does not mark the answer correctly on the answer sheet. Or, the student may even forget to mark the answer at all. Such an error may cause the student to record future answers in the wrong item or question space and upset the accuracy of the entire answer sheet. To avoid this hazard an examinee should compare question numbers with corresponding answer spaces every five questions as he/she works through the test.

For multi-column answer sheets students should learn to cover answer columns already used. This will help avoid errors and confusion. For practice, construct short booklets covering material students can easily answer and develop corresponding multi-column answer sheets. One or two practice sessions in properly marking an answer sheet should be sufficient for most students.

C. Gridding

Accurate gridding, or properly filling in answer bubbles for each question, is a skill that helps many of our test athletes become champions. Gridding practice does not have to be dull. Here are three games which students just developing these skills (grades 3-8) may enjoy.



(grades 4-8)

Rules:

1. Each student is given an answer sheet and is paired with another student.
2. One student grids in a fleet of ships on the answer sheet in the following manner:

1 Battleship: Mark or grid in all answer spaces or bubbles for any two consecutive questions.

1 Cruiser: Grid in any five answer spaces or bubbles so that they form a straight line either across or up and down.

1 Destroyer: Grid any four answer spaces or bubbles so that they form a square.

1 Submarine: Grid any two neighboring answer spaces or bubbles either across or up and down.

3. Once each ship is gridded in place it cannot be moved during the game.
4. When the student with the fleet has finished locating the ships on the answer sheet, the other student is given **25** shots to sink as many vessels of the fleet as possible.
5. A shot is made by calling "shot number one" and identifying an item number and letter as "32-F."
6. The student calling shots will start with a clean answer sheet and will use this sheet to record "hits" and "misses" as the game progresses.
7. The player with the fleet indicates whether the shot was a "hit" or a "miss" on one of the ships. One hit on anything, except the battleship, sinks it. A battleship requires two hits.
8. Points are scored:

10 pts. — Battleship	3 pts. — Destroyer
5 pts. — Cruiser	2 pts. — Submarine

SINK THE FLEET

13. A B C D	25. BATTLESHIP D	37. A B SUBMARINE
14. F G H I	26. ● ● ● ●	38. F G H ●
15. A B C D	27. ● ● ● ●	39. A B C ●
16. F G H I	28. F G H I	40. F G H I
17. A B C D	29. A CRUISER D	41. A B C D
CRUISER G H	30. ● ● ● ●	42. F G H I
19. ● B C D	31. A B C D	43. A B C D
20. ● G H I	32. F DESTROYER	44. F G H I
21. ● B C D	33. A B ● ●	45. A B C D
22. ● G H I	34. F G ● ●	46. F SUBMARINE
23. ● B C D	35. A B C D	47. A B ● ●
24. F G H I	36. F G H I	48. F G H I

*** Note** — The scale of this game can be enlarged or decreased. For example, one could permit use of only the top half of the answer sheet. Fewer ships and shots could be used for younger children.

*** Bonus** — This game not only familiarizes students with answer sheets but also provides practice in listening to directions and developing problem-solving skills.

Follow the LEADER



(grades 3-6)

Rules:

1. Have one student draw a simple pattern on an answer sheet using straight lines which connect grid spaces as follows.
2. Other students are given clean answer sheets.
3. The first student calls off, in order, each number and letter through which the line runs.
4. The other students mark their answer sheets to correspond to each number and letter as they are called. (Numbers and letters may **not** be repeated.)
5. Students are to then draw a connecting line between the marked answer spaces to obtain a pattern.
6. The object of this game is to see if each student's answer sheet pattern agrees with the first student's pattern.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

1. A B C D	13. A B C D	25. A B C D
2. F G H I	14. F G H I	26. F G H I
3. A B C D	15. A B C D	27. A B C D
4. F G H I	16. ● ● ● ●	28. ● G H I
5. A B C D	17. ● B C D	29. ● B C D
6. ● ● ● ●	18. ● G H I	30. ● G H I
7. ● ● ● ●	19. ● ● ● ●	31. ● B C D
8. F G H I	20. F G H I	32. F G H I
9. A B C D	21. A B C D	33. A B C D
10. F G H I	22. F G H I	34. F G H I
11. A B C D	23. A B C D	35. A B C D
12. F G H I	24. F G H I	36. F G H I

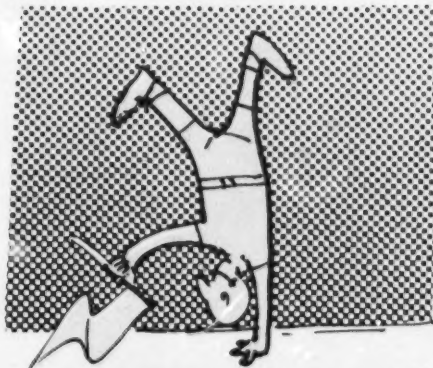
*** Note** — The pattern should become more intricate as students become more skilled.

*** Bonus** — This game also provides excellent practice in following oral directions which is vital to effective test-taking.

"SIMON SAYS" (grades 3-6)

Rules:

1. This game is played essentially in the same manner as the preceding **Follow the Leader** game. However, the players should mark only what "Simon Says"
2. The leader (usually the teacher) should randomly mix Simon directions with non-Simon directions.
3. Only Simon directions will lead to the desired pattern.



SIMON SAYS!

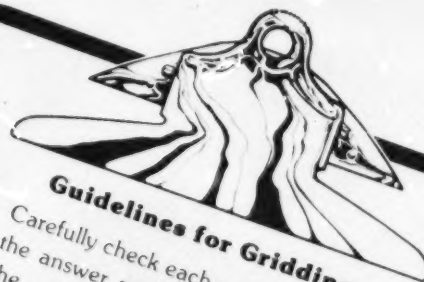
***Note** — Increasing the pace of the directions may make this game more interesting as students become more skilled.

***Bonus** — This game also develops good listening skills.

Let these grid games be a springboard for other simple activities which make using an answer sheet less threatening and help students become more familiar with an answer sheet and the process of using it correctly.

STEP 4: Runs, Hits, but **No** Errors . . .

Careless mistakes in gridding can be minimized by following this six point checklist. Teachers should encourage students to remember the following guidelines.



Guidelines for Gridding

1. Carefully check each answer as you fill in the answer space. Make sure you fill in the answer space for the answer you have chosen.
2. Completely erase any answers you may have marked incorrectly. (Avoid smudges.) Then clearly mark your intended answer.
3. **DO NOT** make any extra marks on your answer sheet. (Scoring machines do not understand extraneous marks.)
4. Whenever possible, use any extra time to check and recheck your answers.
5. Make sure you are using the correct pencil or marking device for the kind of test card or sheet. (Ask the test administrator if you are unsure.)
6. All answer marks should be good and solid, and neither too shiny nor too pale.

STEP 5: Training: Rest, Diet and Dress

Rest, diet and dress can cause some interference during the testing game. Teachers should stress these three training tips to students just before a big test.

A. Rest —

Preparing for any type of performance should not lead to exhaustion. The athlete and the student benefit from proper rest prior to the big event. The night before a test the student should review the material he/she has studied and then get a good eight hours sleep.

B. Diet —

Proper nourishment is also helpful for good performance. Protein and carbohydrates are needed for endurance and energy. A balanced breakfast is the best idea before a morning exam. Generally students should not skip meals before tests. Taking a test on an empty stomach is usually uncomfortable.

C. Dress —

Teachers should remind students to select comfortable clothes for a testing session that are appropriate for the weather. A jacket or sweater may be a good idea because sometimes the air conditioning is too cool. Students should also avoid jewelry that makes noise or gets in the way of their writing. Hair should be clipped back out of the eyes. And if students have glasses, encourage them to wear them.

STEP 6: Knowing the Specific Details of a Test

As an athlete often studies the competition's unique characteristics prior to a big contest, each test will have some unique characteristics the examinee must understand. The teacher may be able to supply some information during pretest orientation.



However, the official test administrator should be able to fill in any details on the day of testing. The following is a list of questions the examinee should have answered before the test begins.

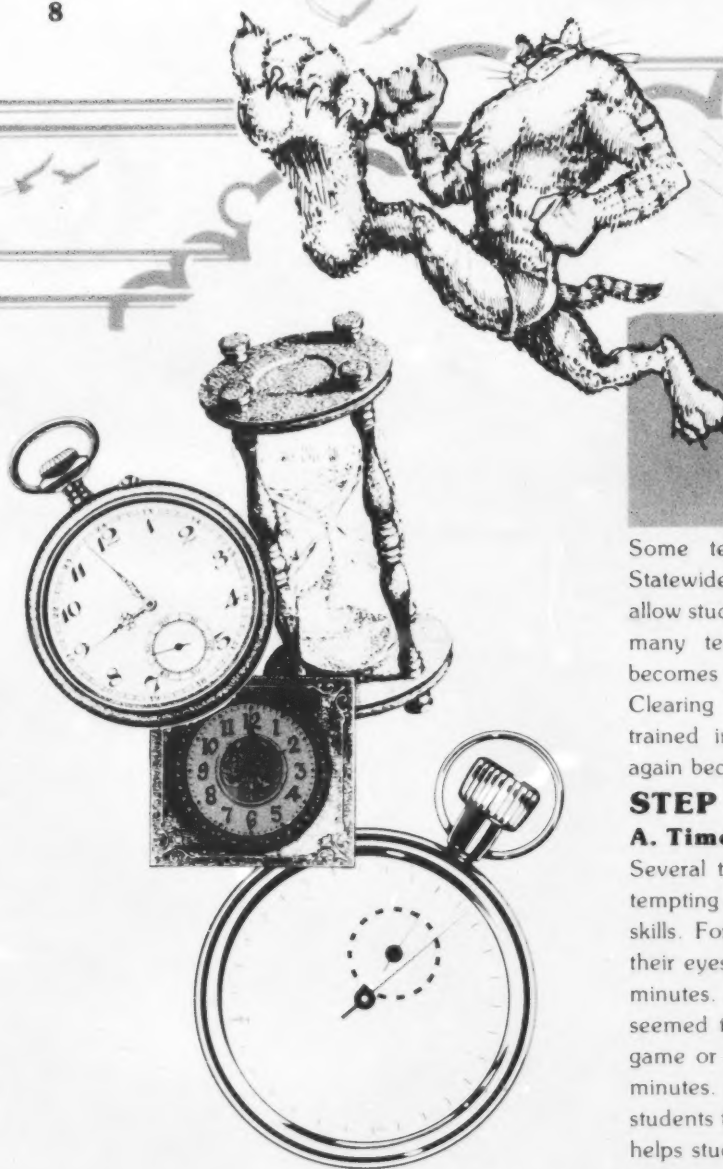


Know The "Score" On These!

1. How will this test be scored?
2. Who will get the test results?
3. How will the results be used?
4. Where and when will the test be given?
5. What materials should students bring to the test?
6. Will there be a particular seating arrangement?
7. How will make-up testing be done?
8. Will the test administrator answer questions during testing?
9. Can students go back and work on previous sections of the test if they finish a section early?
10. Will the test be timed?
11. How do students replace broken pencils during the testing?
12. Should students guess on questions they do not know?
13. What should students do when they finish but others are still working?
14. How will the testing materials be collected?
15. Who will help students understand the results once the test is scored?

SUMMARY

"Warming up" for a big test gives the examinee a decided advantage once the test starts. Teachers should devote adequate time for providing pretest orientation. The skills students develop while preparing for testing situations are also applicable to other educational endeavors. Coaches should remember not to let students enter the testing competition "cold." A good warm-up helps avoid muscle cramps during the main testing event.



Part 2

"Overcoming the Time Hurdle" OR Time Management

Some tests, like those used by the Florida Statewide Assessment Program, are not timed and allow students to work at their own pace. However, many tests are rigidly timed, and this factor becomes a stumbling block for many students. Clearing the time hurdle takes practice but once trained in time management skills, the student again becomes a stronger test-taking athlete.

STEP 1: Warm-up Calisthenics

A. Time Awareness

Several techniques can be used by a teacher attempting to coach students on time management skills. For instance, have students sit quietly with their eyes closed or heads down on desks for two minutes. Then discuss how long that time interval seemed to them. Next, have the students play a game or do some other engaging activity for two minutes. Again, through class discussion, ask the students to compare the two intervals. This activity helps students become aware of what time means to them. Repeat this activity periodically.

- **Note** — Using a variety of interval lengths will help students become more time conscious.
- **Bonus** — By becoming more familiar with this activity, students become better able to pace themselves during regular class assignments.

B. Time Estimating

Another activity is to have students, using no time device, sit quietly. Tell them to raise their hands when they think three minutes has elapsed. Make a note of exactly when each student raises his or her hand. Reward the pupil whose guess was closest to three minutes.

Next, have the students read, take a quiz, or do some other engaging activity. Again, ask them to

raise their hands when they think three minutes has passed, and reward the student whose response was nearest the exact time. Discuss the problem of estimating time and how certain conditions like idleness or activity influence our estimations of specific time intervals. Experiences like these should help the examinee who has little notion of how much time has passed during testing.

*** Note** — Time estimating could be used to help students learn to follow a class time schedule. Reward students who become proficient at getting things done on schedule without being reminded.

*** Bonus** — Once students learn to pace themselves effectively, general class schedules may run smoother.

STEP 2: Practicing Timed Tests 🐾

Before practicing timed tests it may be helpful to understand why some tests are timed and other tests are untimed. Many commercial tests have time limits clearly specified within the administrative directions. These time limits must be strictly followed if the testing conditions are to remain standardized. By providing standardized conditions, such as time limits, the test results for students can be compared with the norms provided by the test publisher. Without standardized conditions the norms may be useless.

Untimed tests, such as the Florida Statewide Assessment Program tests, are designed to measure whether or not a student has mastered certain skills. Such tests are called criterion-referenced tests. Because these tests are intended to reveal specific student knowledges, timing the test is not important.

In the early grades students generally experience untimed or generously timed tests. However, in many instances, as a student progresses through school the testing-time factor gains importance. For example, a recall of multiplication facts test or a typing test may reasonably require a student to perform a task in a set period of time.

However, some students enter a timed testing situation having never experienced a timed test. When this happens, the individual often becomes anxious. Such anxiety can diminish student performance. Teachers can minimize this anxiety by giving timed tests during routine instruction. When teachers impose time limits on a simple quiz, students tend to gain confidence through coping with actual timed restrictions.

STEP 3: Skipping 🐾

On lengthy tests a student may quickly scan the entire test and gain information as to the kinds of questions and how difficult they are. In this way, students can plan their time. They can begin with the first question but skip questions which seem too difficult or which will take considerable time to answer. Upon reaching the last question, the student can then go back and attempt those questions which were skipped. **Teachers should caution students that when they skip a question, they need to skip the corresponding answer space as well.** Mixing up skipped questions and corresponding answer spaces is a hazard that can cost a test athlete some valuable points!

To develop the art of skipping questions, teachers should let students practice taking tests in which they skip some items and come back to those questions after working through the entire test. Have the students mark their practice test answers on a separate sheet so each student becomes conscious of skipping the corresponding blanks on an answer sheet.

STEP 4: Skimming 🐾

Skimming is another skill that can help students achieve their best on an important test. Students may have learned skimming as a reading skill. If so, they have the general idea. If not, a teacher may need to present skimming more formally, keeping in mind that skimming test questions is different from skimming while reading. When skimming a test the idea is to see

- 1) what the items are about,

- 2) whether they change as the test goes along, and
- 3) whether easy items are interspersed with difficult items or
- 4) whether the test items get progressively harder.

Skimming is most practical when used with short tests; skimming a long test may take too much time. Once again, if you want students to learn or use this skill, give them practice. Teachers should give students sets of items in which they are required to choose the three easiest or the three hardest items. Such practice will get students accustomed to skimming while taking tests. Discuss why the easy items

are simple and why the hard ones are difficult, keeping in mind that certain items will be hard for some students but easy for others. Remember to point out that practice in skimming will reduce the possibility of never reaching an easy item appearing toward the end of the test because the student got "stuck" on some hard items early in the test.

Try giving tests in which the items jump from one topic to another throughout the test. Then, have students, without trying to answer the items, determine how many different topics are covered in a test. Also, have them say which topics are easy and which are hard. (This discussion should give you some ideas about topics needing extra instruction.)

*** Note** — Some students read much more rapidly than others. Slower readers, when taking timed tests, should keep the amount they have to read as small as possible. Slow readers should **not** skim the whole test first as previously recommended. Skimming for slow readers should be only for short questions on familiar material that appears easy for the student to read and understand. Slow readers should answer short questions first. The last items to be read should be the ones which have several lines or sentences.

*** Bonus** — Skimming is a skill that students can utilize when studying or doing independent research.

SUMMARY

Time is an obstacle in the testing game that can be managed effectively with proper training. Teachers can help students by providing experiences that promote sound time-management skills. Such skills practiced routinely can lead to more effective classroom management as well as improvement of an individual's performance on timed tests. Teachers should remind students to manage their time, not let time manage them!

Here is a basic checklist for time management while taking a test. Teachers might want to modify this list and distribute it to students.

Time-Management Checklist for Tests



1. Be sure you understand all directions. (This will save you time since you will not have to ask questions once the clock starts.)
2. Make special note of the time allowed for each section. The test administrator may post the beginning and ending time.
3. Keep your eye on the time and try to pace yourself. (A wristwatch helps.)
4. Skim the entire timed section. Get the feel of what is expected (i.e., format, content, length).
5. If the test seems lengthy, skip questions which are difficult and come back to these skipped questions later.
6. Be cautious. When skipping questions, skip corresponding answer spaces as well.
7. If the test is short, you may want to approach questions or problems in order of difficulty, attempting easier items first, and leaving the more difficult questions for last.
8. As always, use any remaining time to recheck your work.



Part 3 "The Winning Edge" or Problem-Solving Tactics

Champion athletes often employ certain strategies that help them get the edge on their competition. This section presents strategies students can use during testing which could help improve their testing performance. These strategies are not to assure that students will pass tests without proper preparation in the content area. Rather, they are logical approaches to difficulties many students encounter on standardized tests. Some students already employ these problem-solving tactics. However, if every student received training in these particular strategies, they too should have "a winning edge" during testing.

STRATEGY 1 — Educated Guessing

Like athletes, students taking tests must sometimes take calculated risks or make educated guesses. (Keep in mind, however, that educated guessing should never replace adequate preparation for a test.) In most cases, students should be encouraged

to guess if they do not know the answer to a test item. Tests given on a large scale, such as most commercial, standardized tests or statewide assessment tests, do not have a "correction" built into the scoring which will penalize students for guessing. In fact, students cannot lose by guessing even if there is a correction factor, and they stand to gain if there is **no** correction.

"Corrections" for guessing used with some commercial tests do no more than adjust the final score for complete random guessing. It makes sense then to mark an answer for every single item, even if there has not been time to read it. However, this strategy of random guessing should be used only when testing time is running out.

When there is time for reading all test questions, it makes very good sense to study every item to see if any of the answer options are clearly wrong. By eliminating obvious wrong answers, the student can select from the remaining choices. In this way, the odds are improved for getting that item correct.

STRATEGY 2 — Estimating

Another good strategy for students to use when taking tests is to estimate what a reasonable answer would be. This can be done on all kinds of questions, but it is particularly useful with math items. Often the person who writes a test item, particularly a math question, will work it several different ways and will examine all the possible wrong answers that are due to using a wrong process or to making computation errors. These wrong possibilities become a part of the three or four possible choices on a multiple choice question. Students attempting this test item may well make a similar error but because their answer is among those offered as one of the choices, it is assumed by the student to be correct.

Now suppose the student had started out by thinking "What would be a sensible answer? Should it be in square yards or square feet? Should it be in meters or yards? Should it be bigger than any number in the problem or smaller than any number in the problem?" By answering these questions prior to working the problem, the student might reduce the number of sensible options down to only one, the correct answer; or, at least the options might be reduced to only two possibilities.

If the problem involves "complicated" numbers such as 28 times 3.02, a student can take another step and ask what would result if some "easy" numbers close to the more complicated numbers on the test were used. The student, thus, gets a good "ball park" idea of what the correct answer is. For example, if asked to multiply 28 times 3.02, a student could multiply 30 times 3 and estimate that the answer has to be near 90. If nothing looks reasonable after this approximation, the student has missed something somewhere and should go back and start over.

Teachers should provide the students with practice in making such estimates. Estimation is an important tool used in everyday life and we should not feel instruction in this skill is improper, unethical or otherwise objectionable. Probably the only situation in which estimates are truly to be frowned upon is in spelling.

STRATEGY 3 — Working Problems Backward

For some kinds of problems, a useful test-taking strategy is to work the problem backward. Working

backward means using each answer choice to solve for information already provided in the problem. This procedure is especially good when the student feels he/she knows just how to solve the problem but does not get any of the answer choices.

For example: The problem might be division involving mixed numbers and decimals such as the following:

$$3\frac{1}{2} \div .25 = \begin{matrix} \text{A} & \text{B} & \text{C} & \text{D} \\ .875 & 1.4 & 14 & 87.5 \end{matrix}$$

A student might try to solve this problem and obtain the answer .14. After repeatedly working the problem, the student might wonder if the correct answer is even there. However, by reasoning that by multiplying .25 times each of the answer choices, a student may determine that one answer might yield $3\frac{1}{2}$. By trying this approach the student finds that, indeed, .25 times **14** is $3\frac{1}{2}$. Why did the student keep getting .14 instead? Because the student used 25 instead of .25 as a divisor which is an easy mistake to make in doing problems of this kind. While the example given here is uncomplicated, even experts find that trying reasonable answers and working backward to confirm outcomes of more complex problems is a useful procedure.

STRATEGY 4 — The Second Attempt

It is very easy to make mistakes in arithmetic problems. Instead of losing points for such errors, a smart test-taker works each problem twice, on **separate** pieces of paper, starting from the beginning each time. This may be particularly important if (1) a problem is long, with many steps, (2) it is an open-ended question in which no alternative answers are provided and (3) "none of the above" is one of the choices.

In problems with many steps, where the results of one step are used in the next step, it is very easy to use the wrong number in a subsequent step even though one has computed correctly. These kinds of errors are often detected when one reworks the problem on a separate piece of paper. Errors will often be repeated again and again if one simply goes back over the original computations to verify them.

STRATEGY 5 — Looking for Tricks

13

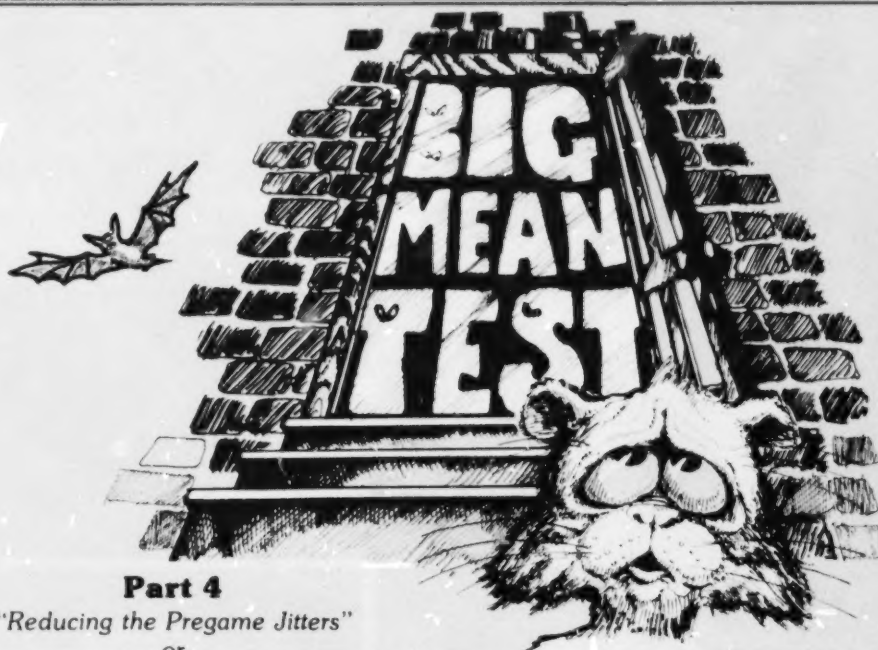
Some students expect all questions on a test to be difficult. In fact, if a question is easy, these students think there must be a trick. However, good tests **do not** have trick questions. If a concept is particularly important or if attention to certain details is critical, an item may seem tricky. For instance, an item might have the correct number but the wrong measure, such as meters instead of kilometers; it is

important that pupils not ignore such issues. However, under ordinary circumstances, the examinee should assume the test is not full of tricks. The person who wrote the question expected it to be simple for someone with the proper training, and a simple straightforward solution is what is wanted. Students should be aware of this and, of course, teachers should not use trick questions on tests.

SUMMARY

The tactics described in this section in no way replace adequate knowledge, proper study, time management, and a good pretest orientation as key factors contributing to maximum individual test performance. Some advanced students may never need these tactics. However, there are those difficult places on tests where even top students sometimes get stuck. At these times, problem-solving strategies can be useful in getting the test athlete out of the bog and back into the race.





Part 4
"Reducing the Pregame Jitters"
 or
Anxiety Control

Before an important test many students become anxious, tense and very fearful of the upcoming exam. They are afraid that they won't be able to recall everything they have learned, or they feel everyone else will out-perform them on the test, or they are simply scared of failure. Prior to competition, many athletes develop these same anxious feelings. Whether student or athlete, such emotions may impair an individual's performance. For example, some students seem to become too upset to concentrate properly. Other students become physically ill; still others are consistently absent on the days important tests are given. This section will discuss four techniques that are designed to help students cope more effectively with their test anxiety.

TECHNIQUE 1 — Talking It Out

Vigorous exercise just before a competition often helps the athlete calm down. Such exercise prior to a test is rarely possible for the nervous examinee. However, just talking about one's feelings can reduce the jitters that anxiety creates.

By "getting something off their chests" in a group discussion, many students experience relief. Some students are helped by finding there are others who share their feelings. On the other hand, some students are helped by hearing people who feel quite differently about the same situation. The following is a technique for providing opportunities for students to "blow-off steam" about taking tests. This technique is designed for use with elementary students but could be helpful as well with certain secondary students.

Begin by having 6 or 10 students sit in a circle with a teacher or counselor as a discussion leader. Each person should, in turn, describe the feelings they have before, during and after an important test. If students seem reluctant to talk, the teacher might prompt students by asking **what flavor a test has?** or **what color a test might be?** or **what kind of weather a test is like?** Once a good discussion develops, be sure to focus on **why** the students chose the color, flavor, or weather they did to represent a test.

- **Note** — Remember, there are no right or wrong responses. Simply let students express what they feel and let them hear what others feel.
- **Bonus** — Another possibility is to have students discuss what they would like "to do" to a test. Students may think up fiendish tortures for it. Let them express this hostility. Be alert for those who are not hostile and want to be nice to the test. See to it they also have a chance to talk.

TECHNIQUE 2 — Understanding Causes of Anxiety

15

Some students can become less anxious if they understand **why** they feel the way they do about tests. This approach is used most effectively with older students who are able to discuss their emotions. Some students say that one reason tests cause anxiety is because results often provide information that may be used to evaluate an individual. The possibility of being discovered deficient in some content area can be threatening and create test anxiety. When a test is viewed as a threat by the examinee, test performance may suffer.

It might help students to understand that there are built-in body mechanisms that help us cope with threatening situations. Under stress, reactions occur in the body's nervous system which can make one's palms perspire, breathing quicken, stomach get queasy, hands turn cold. The body actually concentrates the blood supply into its central cavity instead of the extremities. Years and years ago all these body responses were triggered when an individual was faced with a physical threat, such as a vicious animal or a natural calamity. Today, however, these responses can occur because of quite different threats such as reciting before the class or taking an important test. Such nervous system responses that once prepared us to deal with physical dangers can also help us face threatening encounters in our present environ-

ment. These responses put our entire body on alert and can help increase our performance; however, it is important to harness these responses appropriately so that they do not overwhelm or panic us.

Some students will perhaps know that athletes often become ill prior to an important competition. Illnesses of this kind are usually temporary and are not a sign of weakness. Such reactions may, in fact, produce extra energy. Unless the athlete's nausea is so bad that recovery is not possible in time to perform, nothing probably needs be done to reduce this physiological response.

Students often experience a similar illness prior to a big test, but fortunately many students are able to control these reactions and perform successfully. However, there are students who find these reactions overwhelming, uncontrollable and, thus, do not function well during testing. Discussion sessions, prior to testing, may be helpful in getting these individuals to pinpoint and understand the cause of their test anxiety. Such discussions should be designed to encourage sharing of feelings. A random selection of students should be involved in this group. Through listening and sharing, students may gain useful insights into their own test anxiety. By understanding the basis of their fears, students may lower their tension and anxiety.

*** Note —** *Be sure listening and sharing are equally stressed. A school counselor can be useful in conducting such groups. Don't forget to use them.*

*** Bonus —** *Such group discussions held regularly can help students develop stronger oral communication skills.*

TECHNIQUE 3 — Practicing Positive Thinking

Not all people look at tests in a negative light. Some think of tests as opportunities to show just how good they are. Unfortunately, far too many students, at all grade levels, tend to think negatively about tests. With all this negative talk, it is reassuring to know that in school most people pass tests; most people are not found wanting or inadequate. This is especially true with mastery tests when instruction has been good. Teachers expect pupils to

pass, and the pupils should also expect to pass. So why are many people nervous about testing? Often it is a fad or a habit to be nervous, or both. The "in" thing to do is to talk about how scared one is of a test; how tough it is going to be; how inadequate preparation has been; how one just cannot do it. These are defense mechanisms which provide excuses if one fails a test. However, for the most part, negative talk tends to increase anxiety and tension.

- 16** Turning those negative statements into positive ones would be helpful. For example, instead of thinking about how much work it is to take a test, think how good it will feel when it is over! Instead of thinking of failure, remember how much studying and hard work has been done prior to this test. Expect to do well! Some positive and negative statements which can be used at any grade level to make this technique work follow. To use these statements, organize in a circle a group of six to ten students. Each person in turn is to tell about a task he/she hates to do. Next, the student must make a positive comment about that same task. Here are some examples of what students might say:

Negative

1. "I hate to wash the car."
2. "I hate wearing braces on my teeth."
3. "I hate working with fractions in math."
4. "I hate taking out the garbage."
5. "I hate how my parents set a curfew on my dating time."

Note — The teacher can set the tone for this activity by frequently making positive statements during regular class sessions.

Bonus — If a student begins to practice positive thinking, he/she may develop a more productive attitude toward other school assignments.

Positive

1. "I love the tan I get while washing the car."
2. "Once my teeth are straightened, my smile will be beautiful."
3. "Knowing how to add fractions helped me build a model car."
4. "When I take out the garbage without a fuss, Mom sometimes lets me stay up later."
5. "When I have a creepy date, it's nice to have a curfew."

The purpose of making these two statements is to encourage students to verbalize some positive aspects about seemingly negative situations. Following this exercise, students should get the idea that when they find themselves saturated with negative thoughts and feelings, they can compensate by making positive statements about the same situation. It can become a game after awhile. This challenge of finding the "bright side" of things and not always making negative remarks can be very helpful for students coping with anxiety. Positive statements tend to reduce the level of anxiety.



TECHNIQUE 4 — Relaxation

For those students whose test performance may be less than it should be because of tension, relaxation may also be a useful procedure. Just as there is a body mechanism that responds to threats, the relaxation mechanism can work in the opposite direction. When the relaxation response occurs, the rate of breathing slows, the heart beat slows down, blood pressure is reduced, and the extremities feel warm. Relaxation can be effectively practiced at any grade level or with any age group.

A number of methods for practicing relaxation are available. All of them must be practiced over an extended period of time in order for them to be effective. This means that our test athlete who plans to use relaxation to reduce anxiety should practice these methods for several weeks prior to testing. Total relaxation can be achieved with three basic exercises: muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and concentration. Students can practice these exercises regularly in the classroom when a few minutes of quiet and relaxation seem like a good idea.

Muscle Relaxation

First, everyone should be quiet and comfortable. (If the room permits, students may stretch out on the floor and the lights may be dimmed.) A leader, usually the teacher, should instruct the students as follows:

Close your eyes. Now think about your feet. Wiggle your toes.
Now relax your feet. Just let them go loose.
Now think about your lower legs. Let them go loose.
Now think of your upper legs. Let them go loose.

And so on, with lower body, chest, fingers, lower arms, upper arms, neck, and head. Do this slowly, especially at first.

There may be some giggles, but as you continue this exercise any laughing will stop. Your pupils probably have never really paid attention to their bodies in this way before. They will learn what it feels like to relax as you repeat the exercise several times.

Another kind of exercise may be useful to help reduce tension in a specific set of muscles. This exercise involves deliberately tensing the muscle

groups before deliberately relaxing them. For example, instead of just telling the pupils to think of their toes and make them loose, try having them think of their toes and curl them just as tightly as they can for a count of three. Then, wiggle their toes and turn them just as loose as they can. Do the same for each of the other muscle groups. You might add jaw muscles, eye muscles, and forehead to the list. The jaws are first clenched, then allowed to hang loose; the eyes are turned to one side as far as possible, then closed and relaxed; and the forehead is screwed into as severe a frown as possible, then relaxed.

Breathing Exercise

Once the entire body has been "talked" through and has become relaxed, the students then should focus on their breathing. The leader should instruct the students to breathe slowly through the nose. It helps younger students to have them make a little pot belly when inhaling and to suck in their stomach slightly when exhaling. The students' attention should be directed toward the feelings of relaxation they are experiencing as they breathe deeply.

Concentration

Next ask the students to close their eyes. Now ask them to breathe as slowly and as deeply as possible. Tell them, "Really make the 'out-breaths' slow and deep, and each time you exhale, say to yourself the word **one**. Do not count. Just say the word **one** over and over, with each exhalation." The students should not work at this; it should be done with a passive attitude.

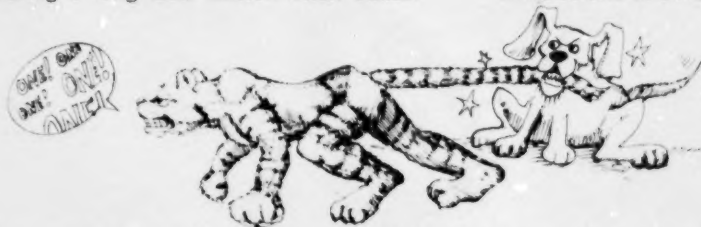
The saying of "one" is just a device to keep students from thinking of other things. The breathing, of course, is directly opposite to the breathing pattern of anxiety, as is the quiet environment and the direct relaxation of sets of muscles.

After several sessions, it may not be necessary to go through the steps of consciously thinking of all the muscle sets and letting them go loose. The special breathing technique will tend to take care of that after some practice. By the time students get to an anxiety-producing test, they should be able to close their eyes, start breathing properly, and say the word "one" to themselves. By doing this they should find they can achieve very quickly a more



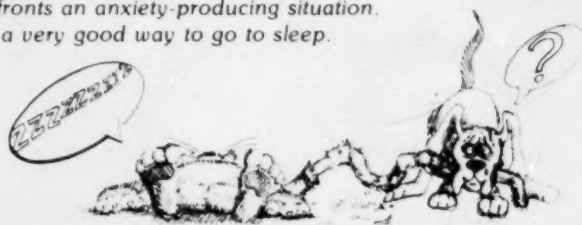
appropriate tension level for effective test performance. During a long test, tension often builds.

Students may appropriately pause for a few minutes and relax again before going on.



*** Note —** Once students become familiar with this three part exercise it can be used whenever a student confronts an anxiety-producing situation.

*** Bonus —** This is a very good way to go to sleep.



SUMMARY

Anxiety may be the most difficult obstacle our test athlete has to face. To overcome test anxiety completely is rare. However, through group discussions, positive thinking, and relaxation techniques, students have a good chance to lower the level of their fears and increase the level of their individual performance. If it appears that a few students are in need of more intense help than this publication offers, consult the school guidance department for further assistance.



FINAL WRAP UP

By using the ideas presented in this guide, many more students could be entering the winner's circle when the test results are tallied. Remember the major goal of testing is to measure accurately the subject-matter competency of each student. Just as athletes are trained for major competition, all students should be trained as able test-takers. Such training should ensure that all students will have a more equal chance to display their very best performance — a goal every student is seeking to achieve.



CLASS NOTES



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